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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Former President Bill Clinton's May 28 Visit to Sri Lanka and the Maldives

11. (U) Summary: Media coverage of President Clinton's May 27-28 visit to Sri Lanka and the Maldives as United Nations Special Envoy for Tsunami Relief was prominent and widespread. Electronic and print media reported on the visit through the weekend and Monday. The coverage of the former President's visit emphasized the international community's hope for the establishment of a joint mechanism for tsunami relief and reconstruction. Maldivian media also offered saturation coverage. End summary.

12. (U) All print press ran front-page banner headlines of the former President's visit. State-run Sunday Observer May 29 headlined, "Clinton supports President," with a large color photo of former U.S. President Clinton and President Kumaratunga. On the same day, the independent Sunday Island led with "Clinton favors joint mechanism," and "Abduction of children a crime and a horrible one - Clinton," alongside large color photo of the President meeting a Buddhist monk in the eastern coastal town of Kalmunai. Independent Sunday Times May 29 bannered, "CBK (President Kumaratunga) eager for deal, Clinton backs her," followed by a front-page story detailing in a straightforward manner Clinton's statements that aid should be made available for people across the country, including those living in areas not under government control. The independently owned pro-opposition United National Party (UNP) Sunday Leader bannered, "Clinton backs joint mechanism," also with a large front page photo of Clinton with United Nations Resident Coordinator Miguel Bermeo. The former President's visit also inspired a long inside feature story in the Sunday Island titled "Bill Clinton as he emerges from 'My Life,'" a favorable book report on Clinton's autobiography. Government owned Sunday Observer also published an inside story from Reuters titled "Clinton to visit LTTE areas next time," with a photo of Clinton and Ambassador Lunstead walking with a Special Task Force escort in Kalmunai. (Note: the Ambassador, who heard Clinton's exchange with Reuters, advises that Clinton said something like he hoped to visit all areas of Sri Lanka in the future. End Note)

13. (U) Coverage continued Monday, May 30, in the Daily News, which headlined: "Joint Mechanism will aid peace process - Clinton," on the front page and published another story on page three, "Joint mechanism a commendable idea - Clinton." The mainstream Daily Mirror led with, "Clinton denounces LTTE child conscription as 'horrible.'" The Financial Times, published with the Daily Mirror, printed a front page photo of Clinton meeting Muslims in Kalmunai and a mid-length article titled, "Clinton sees progress in post tsunami work: wants government to be flexible on buffer zone

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limits." Monday's lead in the pro-Sinhalese Island newspaper took a different angle: "Clinton meets Tiger ally via UN office in Colombo." The article directed criticism toward the U.N. for arranging the participation of the Tamil Relief Organization, alleged to be a front for the LTTE, among a group of NGO's that met with Clinton.

14. (U) The Tamil and Sinhala language press also afforded the visit broad coverage, often mirroring the stories of their English-language counterparts. The sister papers of the English dailies cited above ran nearly identical stories in both Tamil and Sinhalese versions. The LTTE-sympathetic independent Tamil language newspaper on Sunday, May 29, led with: "Clinton to visit LTTE controlled areas during next visit."

15. (U) Local television and radio stations likewise played up President Clinton's trip, repeatedly showing images of his visit to Kalmunai and his press conference in Colombo. Broadcast media highlighted President Clinton's praise of the government's ability to handle the reconstruction effort and support for the establishment of a joint mechanism.

16. (U) Maldives print and online media organizations, which are entirely state-controlled, published brief positive stories as well as stories from wire services, including one

from AFP's Colombo correspondent: "Clinton returns to tsunami-hit Sri Lanka amid slow rebuilding effort."

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17. (SBU) Comment: Although President Clinton visited Sri Lanka this time as a U.N. representative, his widely-reported remarks supporting the proposed Joint Mechanism and raising concerns about the feasibility of imposing a coastal exclusion zone reinforced our own positions on these issues with the public. Since Clinton is still quite popular here, his stance on these issues carries some weight. His visit to a predominantly Muslim area in the East, prominently covered on TV and in the press, also associated the UN and the U.S. with concern for the plight of this minority community. End Comment.
Lunstead